THE NEW DECADE FOR CIOS:

The Twenties Are About to Roar Again

Even though the roaring twenties—here, the 2020s—are barely a few weeks old, it's already abundantly clear that every issue chief information officers (CIOs) and information technology (IT) directors had to face in the 2010s will still be in play. Moreover, there will be a slew of new issues emerging. In a bid to make the CIOs and IT directors of today ready for what they'll be facing throughout the decade to come, let's look at the changes afoot.

THE 800 POUND GORILLA IN THE ROOM: SECURITY

First there was the network. Then came the people who wanted to break into the network. Then came network security. Ever since that simple, three-pronged description of security on every online application began, the second part has been at war with the third. New and old developments alike combine to make this issue a permanent bone of contention.

Perimeter defense remains a priority

Protecting the external layer of a network will remain a priority into the 2020s. Trying to keep hackers and other potential intruders out of the network altogether will remain the simplest way of preventing data breaches and other disasters. Since the means to prevent data breaches will remain similar to those of the past, CIOs and IT directors will have to keep doing what they're doing. Implementing proactive security measures – instead of reactive – will still be of utmost importance.

Hackers will branch out

When a zero-day vulnerability to a certain app or tool shows up, the media lands on it with both feet and tells anyone who will click, watch, or listen all about it. That's why hackers going forward will look for less-traveled paths. Look for attacks from simpler strategies such as social engineering or going through apps that haven't been patched as was the case with BlueKeep.

Ransomware is still the threat du jour

Hackers may be branching out, but ransomware is one of the great fallbacks of the modern hacker. For those not

familiar, ransomware is a malware app that seizes control of a user's computer—or network in some cases—and locks it up with a ransom payment required to unlock it and return control to the user. Beating ransomware can be as simple as maintaining extensive offline backups. When ransomware hits, simply unplug the offending terminal, remove it, and replace it with a new one containing your offline backups. Ransomware beaten. But the key point here is that it's going to continue to be a problem and may get worse through the '20s.

The lag remains a problem

Very little in a corporation is done in isolation, and this is a problem for CIOs and IT directors that will carry on into the '20s. That means any move needing unusual resources beyond the normal scope of CIO operations will require the entire corporate structure. That in turn means involving people who know little or nothing about computers. Thankfully, much of the C-suite is beginning to understand that experts should take care of such problems and are looking to give CIOs et al. a wider berth to more quickly address issues.

Protecting privacy will be increasingly important

Regulations are part of the landscape everywhere you look. Depending on your field, you may be subject to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), or the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA).It's a safe bet that such regulations won't be reined in or overridden in the '20s. Being ready to address all of these statutes and those that are likely to follow will be a must in the years ahead. Look for vendors to provide features to help on that front.

MANAGING TOMORROW'S IT: GIG WORKERS, SEAT FILLERS, AND A DISTRESSING LACK OF SKILLS

The "gig economy," in which people work on a largely as-needed basis, has fundamentally changed the nature of employment in a variety of ways some of which are much better than others. For CIOs and IT directors, it's opened up a range of possibilities and left some new, disturbing questions in its wake.

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Addressing the "skills gap"

The so-called skills gap—a fundamental shortage of truly qualified individuals to take open positions—is a problem facing IT departments at many companies. With the growth of the gig economy, the pool of potential recruits has opened up. Companies sufficiently forward-looking to allow for remote workers can now take advantage of qualified workers virtually anywhere in the world with only a few minor modifications to corporate culture. However, many businesses aren't yet ready for remote workers, and those that engage in localized empire-building are likely to lose out on the advantages posed by the gig economy.

A greater demand for automation

While businesses will see value by recruiting from anywhere where qualified people may live, there's still something of an overall shortage to deal with. This is especially true given the constantly shifting nature of IT issues and the ever-increasing complexity found therein. That's going to prompt ever-growing demand for systems that can fulfill these functions rather than waiting and hoping that someone with the relevant skills can be found. This represents a great opportunity for those who make such products as well as for those who can use them to get ahead of competitors looking to gain a first-mover advantage.

A greater focus on development

Businesses will seek to cast a wider net in employment searches and also look diligently for those who have desirable skills. Yet these two strategies will not address every deficiency businesses have. The only way to ensure that employees have desirable skills is to put those skills in place directly. Sometimes referred to as "upskilling," it means that companies will have to put an expanded focus on training despite the risks involved. While it does open up the potential that employees will take those skills and go to other jobs that may be offering higher pay, better benefits, or shorter commutes, it's the only truly effective way to address a shortfall in required skills.

Addressing those still in the office

While the problem isn't so pronounced for those who don't need to come in to work, those who are required to report in are going to pose a substantial issue for businesses. The growth of digital culture, especially among younger workers, will represent some significant problems. Some might expect what's left of the boomers to have the toughest time with new technology, but as it turns out, a Gartner study found that those between 35 and 44 ranked lowest on the "Digital Dexterity Index." This index measures users' ability to adapt to new technology as well as how open users are to working outside of the office. Businesses trying to implement telecommuting may have the toughest time with the more entrenched worker.

QUANTIFYING THE UNQUANTIFIABLE: MEASURING ROI ON FUTURE TECH

A short "Dilbert" series featured Dogbert as "Dogbert the Quantifier," delivering quantifiable measures to things that shouldn't be measured in such a fashion. At one point, he declared someone from a company's "art department" to be worth $85. It helped that, according to Dogbert, he used a process involving "making absurd claims of value while hoping no one asks questions." While it was meant as a lesson about trying to attach value to everything for return on investment (ROI) calculations, it quickly spiraled into life imitating art. That's a point that's going to come back on CIOs and IT directors in the '20s.

"Everybody's doing it" won't be enough

The '20s are expected to be a time where considerations of ROI will be more pronounced than ever. Creating the right business case for new technology will be vital going forward. The C-suite's attention will be firmly locked on anything technological, especially security-related, but that will come with a cost: an increased focus on the costs and the value of returns therein.

Expectations must be managed

Formulating business cases will be a valuable skill going forward, but it won't be the only one. Managing expectations

will also be crucial to CIOs and IT directors. The fact is most digital initiatives fail. A study from Gartner found that two out of three would not only deliver on expectations but would also reveal a business's internal, systemic weaknesses. This would produce what Gartner described as "a gap between expectations and results." Thus, CIOs and IT directors will not only have to produce attractive business cases to get required resources, but they will have to inoculate the rest of the business against the potential failures that will follow once the initiatives paid for are put in place.

ALWAYS CHANGING, THE FUTURE IS

This is just a start of what to expect out of the future for CIOs and IT directors. There's a lot more that won't be obvious for years yet, and even much of what we've seen will likely change as well. A cure for ransomware could be a few years away while new technology may ultimately make the physical office a thing of the past for good. And why not? Why continue to pay property taxes and landscaping costs and power bills when all you really need is server space and a virtual reality application?

"Only time will tell" may be one of the oldest cliches around, but it's a cliché for a reason: it's true. These are all points to watch for in the short term; the farther along we go, the more these points will require modification against what will be current conditions. But this is still a great start along with a more generalized warning: be ready, and never forget the value of a Plan B.

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